

Lee F. Monaghan
Bodybuilding, Drugs and Risk.

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Using “an embodied phenomenological perspective” (p. 188), Monaghan’s rich analysis of bodybuilders is an important corrective to most of the literature on drug use among bodybuilders and other serious athletes. Although the study draws most of its data from male body sculptors in four ‘hard core’ gyms in South Wales (see pp. 19-23), the analysis is generally applicable to much broader, serious athletic settings.

Employing data from 67 in-depth interviews conducted over two years, ethnographic field work, and materials from secondary sources such as bodybuilding magazines, steroid handbooks and published insider accounts of the bodybuilding culture, Monaghan addresses the main themes one would expect of a study such as this one. He critically addresses the issues associated with bodybuilding as a demonised subculture. While presenting the stigmas attached to bodybuilding – and how body sculptors deal with them – Monaghan refutes simplistic explanations about why individuals become bodybuilders and uses this chapter to establish the importance of his methodology for uncovering not only what and who bodybuilders really are but also why, in the process of becoming a true body sculptor, individuals may choose to use particular physique enhancing drugs. Monaghan’s (pp. 28-39) detailed dissection of bodybuilding – covering the differences between competitive and non-competitive bodybuilding, the types of competitors (Physique, Figure Fitness, etc.) and the types of natural or non-drug tested competitions, for example – substantiates that body sculpting is a “variegated and stratified world” in which drug use may or may not be considered appropriate depending on an athlete’s aspirations. Nevertheless, the internal logic of pursuing a physique of ‘excessive’ muscularity means that “drug use is a conceivable possibility for all participants” (p. 39).

Monaghan’s ensuing discussion of the parameters for successful bodybuilding and the pursuit of ‘the perfect body’ underscores the varied objectives ‘hard core’ body sculptors hold. The ethnography demonstrates the plurality the ‘muscular body’ represents for aficionados and documents how bodybuilders seek a ‘particular look’ though the real differences in those looks may be difficult for lay people to recognize. While emphasizing individuality and difference among bodybuilders, Monaghan is careful to emphasize that they are more than serious weight trainers; body sculptors “immerse themselves in a certain mode-of-being, and commit themselves to bodybuilding regimes which, in Giddens’ sense, represent a ‘radical lifestyle choice’” (p. 43). Being a bodybuilder has little to do with entering competitions and everything to do with complete immersion in “the daily ascetic regimes which characterise the everyday life world of bodybuilding” (p. 43) while embracing “a subculturally informed ‘ethnophysiological’ appreciation of ‘excessive’ muscularity” (p. 74).

The discussion about the lifeworld of the bodybuilder establishes two important points. First, it underscores the fact that body sculptors are individuals whose “body-projects” are variable and socially contingent. Second, as individuals, body sculptors reflectively monitor how far they will

pursue 'excessive' muscularity – a decision which makes the athlete “increasingly dependent upon bodybuilding ethnophysiology the further muscle transgresses mainstream normative limits” (p. 92).

“Bodybuilding ethnopharmacology: managing steroid risks,” and “Steroid accessory drugs” provide in-depth insight into the ethnopharmacology that body sculptors develop and employ over the course of their body sculpting projects. This section of the book provides enough detail about each of the different types of steroids and accessory drugs to give the reader a genuine feel for the complex pharmacology of steroid use as well as the sophistication of users' ethnopharmacological knowledge. The chapters emphasize that even though a “pre-given ethnopharmacological stock-of-knowledge represents a guide to action,” (p. 120) body sculptors rely heavily on their own experiences with specific combinations of steroids and accessory drugs to optimize their outcomes while controlling risks to their health.

The final theme Monaghan addresses is the alleged connection between steroid use and violence. This discussion is also an important corrective to the growing popular mythology that so-called 'Roid Rage is a growing social problem. While Monaghan's bodybuilders recognize that the androgenic properties of steroids may enhance so-called masculine traits such as aggression, they point out that heightened aggression does not necessarily translated into violence and when it does there is more at play than the consumption of androgenic chemicals.

One of the main strengths of *Bodybuilding, Drugs and Risk* is Monaghan's focus upon process and the interpretations different bodybuilders have of their bodies as projects. Too often in the literature on sport, categories – hockey player, high performance athlete, wrestler, bodybuilder – replace temporally and spatially contingent agents and the categories themselves then homogenize the activities and practices associated with those undertakings. Participants' actions then emanate from the confines of these comprehensive, static categories; spatial, temporal contingency and agents' changing intentions and definitions of situations are lost. Monaghan's (p. 74) observation about body building and bodybuilders applies to all athletic undertakings.

If the body is the point at which all muscle enthusiasts converge, then this is also their point of departure. Building a lean muscular body is a project which unifies bodybuilders, but also a source of contrast given many different visions of physical perfection. In this highly individualised domain, 'bodybuilder' (a less than satisfactory referent according to some members) is a heterogeneous category. Participants may even pursue their own muscle agenda independent of the dynamic and frequently contested 'objective' criteria dictated by their various different competition federations. Conceptions of 'physical perfection' are spatially and temporally contingent, varying from one individual to the next and also for the same individual during the course of their bodybuilding career.

If there is a shortcoming to Monaghan's monograph it is the absence of a consistent longitudinal narrative to his bodybuilders' experiences. Thus, while sensitive to the fact that 'being' a bodybuilder is a temporal, socially contingent process, there is very little sense of this over an extended timeframe for each of Monaghan's interviewees. One gains, for example, a good sense of the sophistication of bodybuilders' knowledge of steroids but it is hard to see the experiences that led different users to 'go on the juice' and the way in which they developed from steroid initiates to sophisticated

ethnopharmacologists. Greater longitudinal information about the experiences and transitions that each bodybuilder went through would have provided a much richer picture of the lived experiences of body sculptors and the decisions they make with respect to steroid use and the management of potential risks.

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